

Testimony of George Strawbridge, Jr.
Subcommittee on Health Field Hearing
A Review of Efforts to Protect the Health of Jockeys and Horses in Horseracing
April 30, 2012

What has changed since I wrote that address? We have seen the TOBA back off their objective to have drug free racing for Graded Two Year Old Stakes. We have also seen a devastating front page article in the NY Times which points out that 3,800 positives have occurred in a three year period and that 3,600 horses have died. This produced a lead editorial in the New York Times which said:

March 26, 2012
Horses to the Slaughter

“Thoroughbred racing trades on bucolic imagery and glossy beauty, but a report in The Times on Sunday documented the real pillars of its success: the casual and continual mistreatment of vulnerable, overmedicated and ultimately disposable athletes. Reports who analyzed tens of thousands of races and combed through reports of injuries and medical tests found a culture of rampant cheating and feeble regulation, where injured and fragile horses are forced to run while drugged, to the great peril of both animals and jockeys.

The main reason is drugs – the stimulants, steroids, pain medications, anti-inflammatories and other chemicals used to enhance performance and mask injuries. Veterinarians and racing officials acknowledge that abuses are rampant but grossly unpoliced because tracks and state racing commissions lack the will or money to crack down. Much illegal doping takes place on private farms where horses can’t be tested. No single governing body or federal regulations control the industry’s drug practices, and existing punishments are lax.

So horses break down at alarming rates: 3,600 horses died while racing or training at state-regulated tracks in the last three years, The Times found. In Sunland Park in New Mexico – a state that is home to five of the six tracks with the highest breakdown rates – nine horses died in one 13-day stretch in 2010. Two jockeys were hurt, one critically. Necropsy reports told of horses that had been running with debilitating ailments: stomach ulcers, degenerative joint diseases, pneumonia, metal screws from previous broken bones.

The details are painful reading, but we have heard this story before. The death of EIGHT BELLES, who snapped two ankles at the Kentucky Derby in 2008, brought Congressional scrutiny and promises of reform. But a powerful combination of money, secrecy and inattention has blocked progress and left the industry as compromised and dangerous as ever. This seems partly because of racetrack casinos, which have pumped new money into race stakes and added to the pressure to run unfit horses.

Not all owners and breeders are complicit; some are urging reform. Some support a federal bill to ban all racehorse doping. They note that the United States lags behind Asia, the Middle East and Europe in eliminating racetrack drugs. It’s a worthy goal, but, as with previous reforms in this disreputable industry, it faces long odds.”

Words have meanings and words like mistreatment and disreputable are strong and have long lives.

What has been the reaction of the horse world to this article? It has either been ignored or denied. There has been intimidation to put pressure on vets, trainers and even scientists to not testify at this hearing. There is significant opposition to change and reform throughout the horse industry. The preference is to keep the status quo with its addiction to drugs that produce danger to jockey's and pain and death to horses.

We must try and change the status quo and I believe that the only way to do this is to have a natural governing body that has uniform rules and uniform significant penalties for disobeying these rules. Perhaps the federal government would mandate this. If the federal government doesn't affect change, change will not occur as our present organizations are either ineffective or unwilling to seek reform. Our alphabet organizations have only produced a Tower of Babel.